

A YEAR @ ANNENBERG

connections

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Annenberg
SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA



LETTER FROM THE DEAN

Dear Annenberg Community,

I am thrilled to introduce *Connections: A Year @ Annenberg*, our new annual magazine that showcases the dynamic and interdisciplinary work happening every day at the Annenberg School for Communication. At Annenberg, you will find a community of students, faculty, and staff engaged in and committed to the highest standard of teaching, learning, and pioneering research endeavors. This magazine offers a glimpse into the groundbreaking work in our school and celebrates our collaborations across Penn, with our local community, other institutions, and across the globe.

In this issue, you will find highlights from our recent research in four key areas: Health Communication; Politics, Policy, and Institutions; Cultural Inquiry; and Computational Social Science, along with updates and profiles of our students, faculty, and alumni. These areas of study represent the forefront of research and innovation in the field of Communication and Media, and this research network model showcases our collective expertise and collaborative efforts. In addition, we explore the critical field of Climate Communication, which intersects across all our networks. I can't wait for you to read about the impact of our work.

I hope that *Connections: A Year @ Annenberg* becomes your go-to resource for staying connected and informed about the incredible research and scholarship happening at our school.

I encourage you to explore this inaugural issue and become an active participant in our vibrant community. Engage with our content, share your thoughts, and join us in advancing the field of communication research and practice.

Warmly,

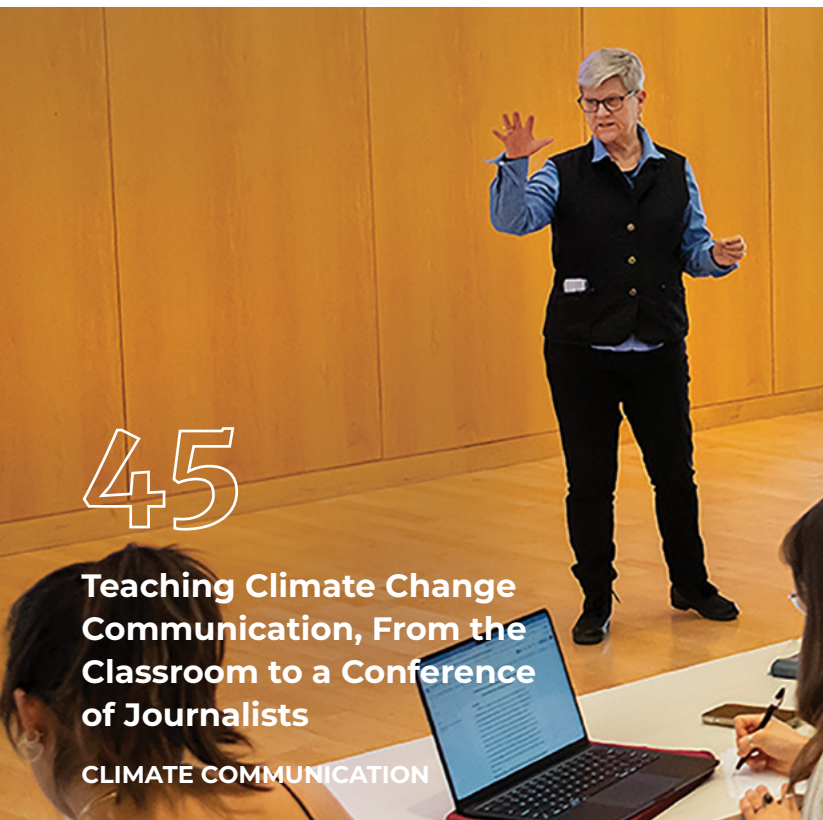
Sarah Banet-Weiser

Walter H. Annenberg Dean and
Lauren Berlant Professor of Communication

“ At Annenberg, you will find a community of students, faculty, and staff engaged in and committed to the highest standard of teaching, learning, and pioneering research endeavors. ”



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STUDENT & FACULTY NEWS



Joseph Turow

A CAREER IMMERSED IN RESEARCH ON AUDIENCES

During the five decades of his academic career, Annenberg professor Joseph Turow has tackled many topics related to advertiser-sponsored media industries.

He has written about TV's doctor dramas, explored the rise and social implications of target marketing; scrutinized the customer tracking practices in online and physical stores; probed biometric issues related to smart speakers; and investigated Americans' "digital resignation" regarding marketers' use of data about them. His latest project is a historical exploration of sellers' "technologies of social division," from peddlers' community maps to ad agencies' forays into predictive and generative artificial intelligence.

Turow has authored 12 books, edited five, and written over 160 articles on media industries. In 2005, *The New York Times* referred to him as

"probably the reigning academic expert on media fragmentation." His books have been translated into Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and Serbian.

"When it comes to privacy and advertising, Joe is one of the foremost scholars in the field," said Sarah Banet-Weiser, Walter H. Annenberg Dean of the Annenberg School. "His groundbreaking research has helped us to understand the power dynamics in marketing and digital media and how these industries shape and influence public perception."

The Early Years

Turow's love for studying media industries started early. His parents, both Holocaust survivors, did not speak English to each other or their friends. Turow, however, became strongly interested in English literature and writing. In high school, he subscribed to *Advertising Age*

“ What started my work in this field was looking into the advertising industry while thinking about audiences, not commercials... ” →



With Klaus Krippendorf
(late emeritus professor)



With Michael X. Delli Carpini (former dean), and Elihu Katz
(late emeritus professor)



and scoured the Brooklyn Public Library for books about the ad industry. His parents preferred a law career for him, but Turow was drawn to a future in writing advertisements.

He changed his mind about a copywriting career while a Penn undergraduate English major. He went on to do a master's at Annenberg and then a Ph.D. at Annenberg. His advisor was George Gerbner, famous for exploring the social implications of television violence. He also worked with and was deeply influenced by Professor Robert Lewis Shayon, a groundbreaking radio writer-producer and television critic.

After receiving his Ph.D., Turow spent 10 years at Purdue University, developing inter-organizational theories of media institutions and conducting several research projects in Hollywood. Many articles and three books came out of his Purdue years. While there, he began writing *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*, published by Oxford University Press in 1989. Twenty years later, the University of Michigan Press approached Turow about updating the book, and an expanded edition was published in 2011.

An Interest in Advertising

Turow's return to Annenberg in 1986 coincided with the start of his research on advertising. His book *Breaking Up America* (Chicago,

His groundbreaking research has helped us to understand the power dynamics in marketing and digital media and how these industries shape and influence public perception.

1996) is about the rise of target marketing and advertisers' exploitation of consumer differences in income, age, gender, race, marital status, ethnicity, and lifestyle. Over the following decades, MIT Press and Yale University Press published five more books by Turow that explore the social implications of new marketing and advertising technologies.

From 1999 to 2006, he collaborated with Kathleen Hall Jamieson at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC). During his time at APPC, Turow convened three internationally attended conferences: on the implications of new technologies for the home, the social meaning of the hyperlink, and issues regarding copyright and fair use in academia. The first two resulted in edited books. The third led to greater freedom for academics' use of copyrighted material.

He also conducted the first four of 10 national surveys on Americans' understanding of and attitudes toward marketers' use of data about

them. Carried out with graduate students, colleagues, and APPC statistician Michael Hennessy, from 1999 to 2023, nine of the surveys yielded full-length *New York Times* articles.

For 10 years, Turow served as Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. Early on, he worked with staff to transform the admissions process from an unwieldy paper-based evaluation activity to a digital online process.

In addition to his research, academic talks, and public outreach (including *Times* op-ed essays, presentations to Congressional Committees, and involvement in privacy-oriented class action lawsuits), Turow has brought his interests in media industries to his graduate and undergraduate teaching. He has taught his undergraduate survey course on media industries and society every year since 1974, with the exception of three sabbatical years. His textbook for the course, *Media Today*, now in its 8th edition, is used in many colleges and universities.

Turow has mentored many students over the years. One, Lee McGuigan (Ph.D., '18), is now an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina's Hussman School. He notes that Turow was extremely helpful with his dissertation and the book that came out of it. "Joe's work is a touchstone for anyone doing critical research on advertising, marketing,

and media industries, so he's had an incredibly broad influence on the field," said McGuigan. "But his personal mentorship of students is notable for its depth. . . . I spent hours in his office chewing on ideas (some more palatable than others), and we've resumed that rumination many times in the years since I left Penn. The flavors still vary."

The Next Chapter

Asked to reflect on how Annenberg has changed during his 44-year association with the school, Turow is direct. "Annenberg has come a long way since I started here as a student," he said. "We have become stronger and stronger over the decades." He added that Annenberg is a powerhouse in the field of Communication and beyond that researches cutting-edge topics and attracts the best in the field.

As Turow gets ready to retire in July 2025, Dean Banet-Weiser notes that he is an integral part of the Annenberg community. "His presence will continue to be felt, even as he enjoys his much-deserved retirement."

Turow sums it up this way: "I am extremely grateful to have had this chance to teach and learn at Annenberg for most of my academic life." ■

faculty news



Dolores Albarracín Elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences

Dolores Albarracín, Amy Gutmann Penn Integrates Knowledge University Professor, was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2024.

She joins 250 leaders in the arts and sciences, business, philanthropy, and public affairs elected for exceptional contributions in their fields.

Founded in 1780 during the American Revolution, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences honors excellence and convenes leaders from every field of human endeavor to examine new ideas, address issues of importance to the nation and the world, and work together “to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.”

Albarracín’s research, a combination of basic and applied psychology, illuminates how people form their attitudes and beliefs, using this knowledge to develop strategies that enhance social interactions and support beneficial public policies. She has published six books and nearly 200 journal articles throughout her career. ■

She is the 28th Penn Integrates Knowledge Professor with joint appointments in the Annenberg School for Communication and School of Arts & Sciences, as well as secondary appointments in Penn Nursing and the Wharton School. She is the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Science of Science Communication Division.

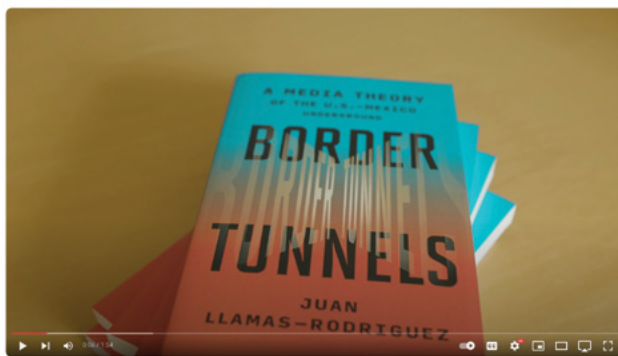


Juan Llamas-Rodriguez’s New Book Explores Depictions of U.S.-Mexico Border Tunnels

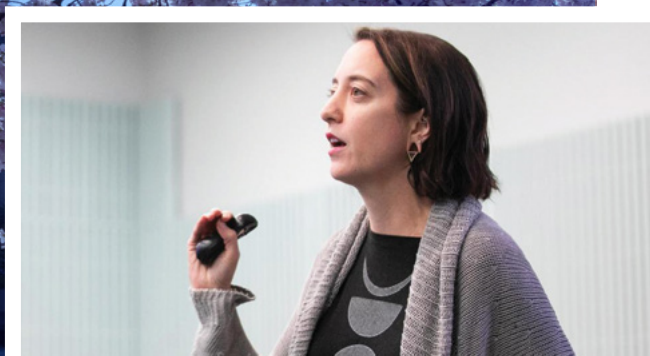
Juan Llamas-Rodriguez is a global media scholar, an assistant professor, and the associate director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at Annenberg.

His latest book, *Border Tunnels: A Media Theory of the US-Mexico Underground* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), examines how the media portray the underground tunnels connecting Mexico and the United States. These representations range from reality TV to evening news reports.

Llamas-Rodriguez analyzes how these often sensationalized and inaccurate representations shape public perception of migration, border restrictions, and other contentious issues. ■



WATCH THE VIDEO:



Jessa Lingel Helps Develop a Grassroots Internet Network in Philadelphia

Associate Professor Jessa Lingel studies digital culture, exploring how relationships to technology can show us gaps in power or possibilities for social change.

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when elementary school classes and doctor’s appointments moved online, Philadelphia’s digital divide was put into stark relief. About 70% of the city has access to high-speed internet, leaving 30% percent behind.

In 2020, Lingel became part of a group searching for new ways to ensure all Philadelphians are online — Philly Community Wireless (PCW).

The group is building a community-owned and operated internet network in North Philadelphia, focusing on the areas north of Norris Square Park.

“It’s been amazing working with PCW. They are so deeply committed to bringing broadband connections to the Philly communities that need it the most,” said Lingel.

Lingel has connected several undergraduates with PCW. Computer Science major Wenxi Chen is working on community organizing, technical installs, and training with the group, while Cognitive Science major Megha Govindu has been preparing research grant proposals.

“Penn students have put in volunteer hours with PCW. They’ve helped install broadband infrastructure, conduct outreach efforts with community organizations, and supported research projects related to broadband policy,” Lingel said. ■



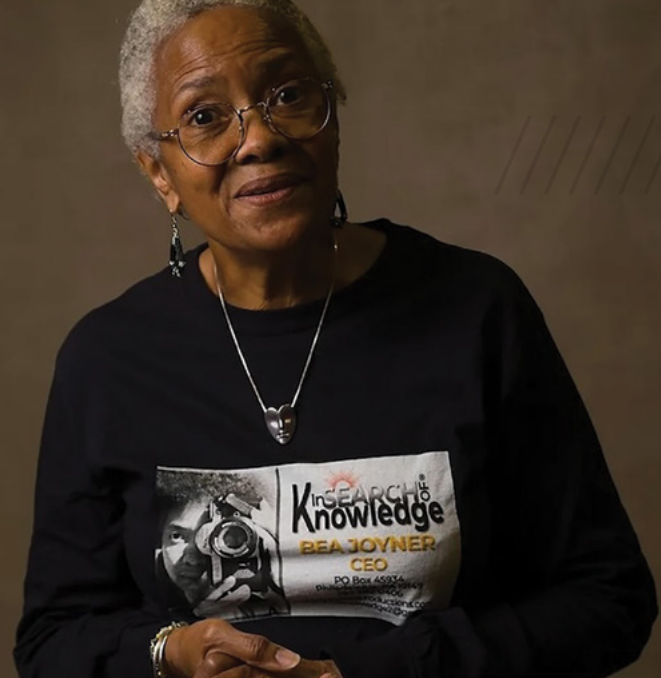
Sneak Peek: LAUNCH OF A BRAND NEW PODCAST

“Annenberg Conversations” is a new podcast series where host Sarah Banet-Weiser, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, examines the vital and pressing issues in the field of Communication with leading Annenberg scholars.

In each episode, Banet-Weiser and guests will delve into the latest research, trends, and debates shaping the world of communication.

In the inaugural episode — “Unpacking Election Politics” — Dean Banet-Weiser spoke to Associate Professors Sarah J. Jackson and Yphtach Lelkes about how affective polarization, the “uncommitted” movement, and race and gender shaped the 2024 presidential elections in the United States. ■





Sharing the Stories of Community Media Makers in Philadelphia

Antoine Haywood (Ph.D. '24) fell in love with public access media the day he walked into the studios of People TV, the public access television channel in Atlanta.

Haywood received the 2022 Sachs Program for Arts Innovation grant for his project, which includes a website that features short videos and audio clips of BIPOC storytellers reflecting on their experience making community media in Philadelphia.

"I came in and was just totally swept away," he said. "It was really about seeing other Black people in a space, in a community media center, making content and working collaboratively."

Haywood, who graduated from Annenberg this year, didn't lose his enthusiasm for public access media over the two decades that have passed since he first entered the now-defunct People TV.

As part of his dissertation research, he recorded the stories of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) media makers at [Philadelphia Community Access Media \(PhillyCAM\)](#), where he directed community engagement programs for eight years.

His project, "[Telling Our Stories: A Multimodal Philadelphia Community Media Storytelling Project](#)," informed by an advisory committee of PhillyCAM members, pairs portraits taken by Annenberg Digital Design Specialist Kyle Cassidy with oral histories recorded by Haywood and his research assistants Karen Walker and Maya Winneg.

"Something that I feel that's not really focused on in research is the story of the storytellers," Haywood said. "This is a multimodal way of getting at the experiences, the motivations, the aspirations that live within the people who produce content through our public access TV and local radio resources at PhillyCAM."

“Often, emphasis is placed on what media makers produce, and very little is known about their processes and motivations,” he said. “Our project aims to shift and expand that perspective.”

While at the Annenberg School, Haywood studied the impact of local storytelling networks on civic participation, democratic communication, collective learning, and community care in communities of color. His immediate research focused on understanding the contemporary relevance of public, educational, and governmental cable television (PEG) infrastructure.

An interactive exhibit featuring “Telling Our Stories” portraits and oral histories premiered at PhillyCAM’s “People Power Media Fest” in 2023. It was installed at Philadelphia City Hall in October 2024 as part of the City of Philadelphia’s “Creative Philadelphia” program.

This fall, Haywood joined the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications as an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism. ■



WATCH THE VIDEO:



Brendan Mahoney Wants To Know How the Internet Affects Us

Brendan Mahoney (Ph.D. '24) grew up online.

On his family computer in a small New England town, he explored the still-new internet, fascinated by the way people communicated online.

By the time Mahoney left New England to study economics and English at the State University of New York (SUNY) Geneseo, the internet was more accessible than ever.

He found himself captivated by research on the way people use social media to communicate and realized that he could be doing this research too.

He was inspired to apply to Annenberg by fellow Geneseo alum Sean Fischer (Ph.D. '23), who was already enrolled at the school. “He was doing work and asking questions that I found so fascinating — about the intersection of culture and technology,” Mahoney said.

At Annenberg, Mahoney came to study the digital spaces where people organize activist movements and the corporations that keep those spaces online (or take them down).



In writing his dissertation, “The platformization of ideology: How left- and right-wing social movements perform intellectual work on Reddit,” Mahoney focused on around 60 different subreddits, forums devoted to discussing specific topics on the website Reddit, dedicated to left- and right-wing political and social causes in the U.S.

He used quantitative methods to analyze posts in subreddits that were activated after the 2020 murder of George Floyd — and the protests that followed — and coded them for different ideologies.

“My research is broadly trying to get at the question, ‘What kind of political and social movement actors does social media work for?’” he said. “And specifically, what kinds of social movement actors are better able to produce and reproduce their ideologies online?”

This fall, Mahoney joined the faculty of the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information as an assistant teaching professor of library and information science. ■

A Comm Major's Journey from Pop Culture to Networked Technology and Beyond

When communication major graduate Anika Gururaj (C'24) arrived at Penn from Bangalore, she didn't imagine going to law school. But after three years at Penn, she has found herself there.

“I didn't have a major in mind when I got to Penn,” she said. “I just wanted to spend the first semester exploring different courses and I happened to take a class with Professor Jessa Lingel.”

The course was “Critical Approaches to Popular Culture.” Gururaj loved it.

“It married theoretical learning with an understanding of the practical implications of what we were reading in class,” she said. “It felt so contemporary and relevant to the real world and current events.”

Taking Lingel's class led her to take more communication courses and become a Communication major. Each class she took exposed her to new facets of the field and sent her on new paths of exploration.

Gururaj's interest in law blossomed during a course on the history and theory of freedom of expression taught by Professor Carolyn Marvin. She realized that legal cases, rhetoric, and literature fascinated her and found herself drawn to the intersection of law and communication.

A PASSION FOR PRIVACY

Another eye-opening academic experience came when Gururaj took “Communication in the Networked Age” with Professor Sandra González-Bailón. It got her thinking about the impact technologies like Facebook and Instagram have on privacy and free speech.

She completed an independent study with González-Bailón, focused on the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#). The DSA, a groundbreaking piece of legislation, regulates privacy laws for social media platforms operating in the European Union.

“Going to law school was the perfect next step to allow her ideas to consolidate and find a way, as I am sure she will, to expand on current regulatory frameworks,” González-Bailón said.

For Gururaj, the transition from a Communication major to a prospective law student represents more than just a shift in academic focus — it embodies a spirit of intellectual curiosity, adaptability, and growth.

As she heads into this next chapter — she started at Harvard Law this fall — Gururaj is keeping lessons from Annenberg close. ■

“The support I've received from my professors and classmates has gotten me to the point where I feel confident enough to begin my law school journey.”



HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Tailoring Culturally Appropriate Messages for LGBTQ+ Young Women

In a recent study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Andy Tan, Associate Professor of Communication, and colleagues sought to increase resistance to tobacco marketing among young adult sexual minority women. This is notable in the U.S., where young women who identify as LGBTQ+ are up to 4.8 times more likely to smoke cigarettes than their heterosexual peers.

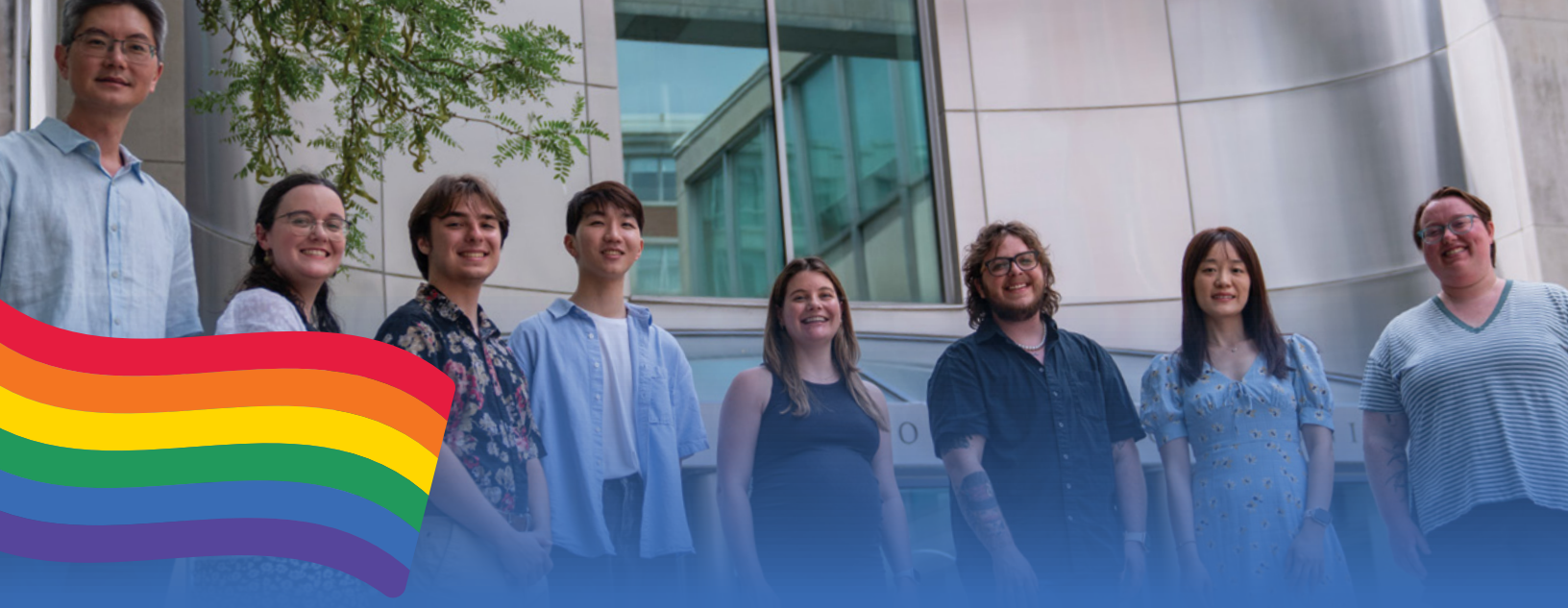


“ This places them at significantly higher risks of smoking-related illnesses, including cancers and heart disease”

ANDY TAN, DIRECTOR OF THE HEALTH COMMUNICATION & EQUITY LAB AT ANNENBERG

LGBTQ+ WOMEN ARE
4.8x
more likely to smoke cigarettes





Annenberg Lab Uses VR to Combat Opioid Overdoses

THE STUDY

The study participants were ages 18–30, identified as LGBTQ+, and identified as women. 1,212 participants were smokers and 1,002 participants did not smoke.

The researchers recruited participants from existing online studies (notably the PRIDE Study, a long-term national health study of LGBTQIA+ people conducted by doctors and research scientists at Stanford University and the University of California, San Francisco), social media, and a dating app.

Participants answered surveys about their smoking history, plans to purchase cigarettes or quit smoking, attitudes and beliefs about the tobacco industry, and demographics. They saw messages for one month and then answered a follow-up survey.



This study was among the first to focus on supporting young adult LGBTQ+ women in quitting smoking, as there is a gap in knowledge of effective strategies for this group. It was also more inclusive by recruiting both cisgender and transgender women.

THE FINDINGS

Tailored messages were more effective than non-tailored messages in reducing positive beliefs about the tobacco industry among those who smoke. After seeing the messages for one month, both types had positive effects among those who smoke, such as more plans to quit smoking and fewer plans to purchase cigarettes. Both types of messages also had positive effects on those who do not smoke, such as having more negative attitudes and beliefs about the tobacco industry.

The finding showed that tailoring anti-smoking messages for the LGBTQ+ community can be effective in reducing positive beliefs about the tobacco industry. This approach can help inform the design of future anti-smoking campaigns.

The study's researchers will continue adjusting anti-smoking messages and testing their effects in a follow-up research study. They are also exploring ways to design tailored messages to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ audiences more broadly. ■

In the past year, over 300 people in Camden County, New Jersey, died from opioid overdoses. “That’s a scary number,” said Kyle Cassidy, co-director of the Annenberg Extended Reality Lab. “We must do whatever we can to change that number to zero.”

The Extended Reality Lab and Penn Nursing are using an untraditional way to fight the opioid crisis — virtual reality (VR) training on how to administer the lifesaving drug naloxone, also known as Narcan, which reverses opioid overdoses.

The Extended Reality Lab first made a VR Narcan training video in 2018, when Ann Marie Hoyt-Brennan of Penn Nursing asked if they could translate the typical hour-long, in-person session offered to nursing students into something more accessible.

The result was a 9-minute immersive VR video that was just as effective as in-person training.

When Robert Ferris, chief of detectives in the Camden County Prosecutor’s Office, saw the video, he asked if the lab could make a video for Camden County.

The VR training video was filmed in Camden County with a script co-written by Annenberg doctoral students Kate Okker-Edging and Nya Mbock, as well as undergraduate Communication major Oscar Vazquez.

People in Camden County have ample access to Narcan — the county has installed first aid kits with the medicine in public libraries, health facilities, schools, courts, bars,

motels, parks, and other settings where someone might be able to respond to an overdose, but not everyone knows how to use them. The VR training video is another way to help people understand how to use the lifesaving pharmaceutical, said Camden County Health Officer Paschal Nwako.



“Rarely do we get to see such an immediate lifesaving benefit of our research,” said Annenberg Dean Sarah Banet-Weiser. “We are all so thrilled and proud that Kyle and VR Lab’s innovative use of virtual reality can be used to efficiently and effectively train anyone to revive people who are overdosing.” ■



Groundbreaking Analysis Unveils Secrets to Predicting and Changing Human Behavior

Pandemics, global warming, and rampant gun violence are all clear lessons in the need to move large groups of people to change their behavior. When a crisis hits, researchers, policymakers, health officials, and community leaders need to know how best to encourage people to change en masse and quickly.

But each crisis leads to rehashing the same strategies, even those that have not worked in the past, due to the lack of definitive science on what interventions work across the board, which is often combined with well-intended but erroneous intuitions.

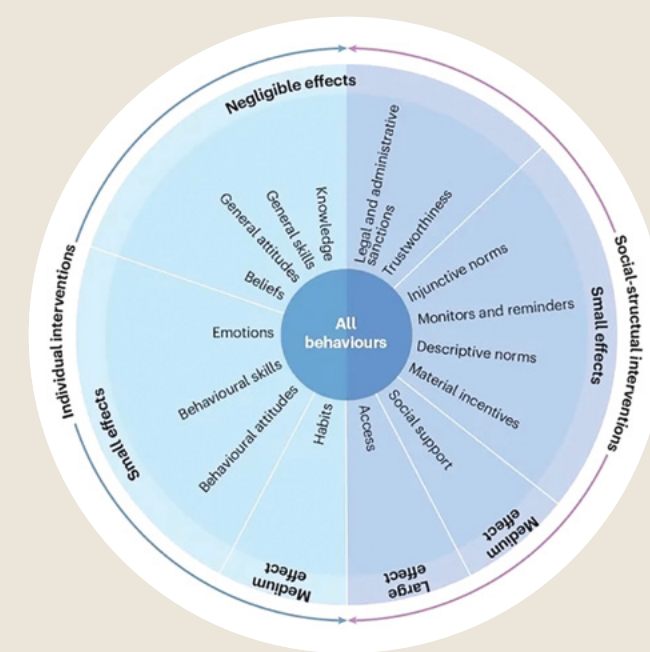
To produce evidence on what determines and changes behavior, Dolores Albarracín, Amy Gutmann Penn Integrates Knowledge University Professor and colleagues undertook a review of all of the available meta-analyses — a synthesis of the results from multiple studies — to determine what interventions work best when trying to change people’s behavior. The result is a new classification of predictors of behavior and a novel, empirical model for understanding the different ways to change behavior by targeting either individual or social-structural factors.

Their paper, published in *Nature Reviews Psychology*, shares the strategies that people assume will work — like giving people accurate information or trying to change their beliefs — actually do not. At the same time, others, like providing social support and tapping into individuals’ behavioral skills and habits as well as removing practical obstacles to behavior (e.g., providing health insurance to encourage health behaviors), can have more sizable impacts.

“Interventions targeting knowledge, general attitudes, beliefs, administrative and legal sanctions, and trustworthiness — these factors researchers and policymakers put so much weight on — are actually quite ineffective,” said Albarracín. “They have negligible effects.”

Unfortunately, many policies and reports are centered around goals like increasing vaccine confidence (an attitude) or curbing misinformation. “Policymakers must look at evidence to determine what factors will return the investment,” Albarracín said.

Co-author Javier Granados Samayoa, the Vartan Gregorian Postdoctoral Fellow at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, has noticed researchers’ tendency to target knowledge and beliefs when creating behavior change interventions.



“There’s something about it that seems so straightforward — you think x and therefore you do y . But what the literature suggests is that there are a lot of intervening processes that have to line up for people to actually act on those beliefs, so it’s not that easy,” he said.

TARGETING HUMAN BEHAVIOR

To change behaviors, intervention researchers focus on the two types of determinants of human behavior: individual and social-structural. Individual determinants encompass personal attributes, beliefs and experiences unique to each person, while social-structural determinants encompass broader societal influences on people, like laws, norms, socioeconomic status, social support, and institutional policies.

The researchers’ review explored both of those for their ability to change behavior. For example, a study might test how learning more about vaccination might encourage vaccination (knowledge) or how reductions in health insurance copayment charges might encourage medication adherence (access). Here is what they found:

Individual Determinants

The analyses showed that what are often assumed to be the most effective individual determinants to target with interventions were not the most effective. Knowledge (like educating people about the pros of vaccination), general attitudes (like implicit bias training), and general skills (like programs designed to encourage people to stop smoking) had negligible effects on behavior.

What was effective at an individual level was targeting habits (helping people to stop or start a behavior), behavioral attitudes (having people associate certain behaviors as being “good” or “bad”), and behavioral skills (having people learn how to remove obstacles to their behavior).

Social-Structural Determinants

The researchers also found assumptions around the most effective and persuasive social-structural strategies were not true either. Legal and administrative sanctions (like requiring people to get vaccinated) and interventions to increase trustworthiness, justice, or fairness within an organization or government entity (like providing channels for voters to voice their concerns) had negligible effects on behavior.

Norms and forms to monitor and incentivize behavior had some effects, albeit small. The most effective was focusing on targeting access (like providing flu vaccinations at work) or social support (facilitating groups of people who help one another to meet their physical activity goals).

FUTURE USE

Granados Samayoa says that knowing which behavior change interventions work at which levels is especially crucial in the face of growing health and environmental challenges.

Albarracín is gratified policymakers will now have this resource.

“Our research provides a map for what might be effective, even for behaviors nobody has studied. Just like masking became a critical behavior during the pandemic, but we had no research on masking, a broad empirical study of intervention efficacy can guide future efforts for an array of behaviors we have not directly studied but that need to be promoted during a crisis.” ■

& POLITICS, POLICY, INSTITUTIONS

Bridging the Digital Divide and Bringing Pennsylvania Online

In today's digital age, access to the internet is more than just a convenience. Unfortunately, many Americans still face significant barriers to getting online.

In response to this inequity, researchers from the Media, Inequality & Change (MIC) Center at Annenberg and the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University launched the Pennsylvania Broadband Research (PBR) Institute, a research group dedicated to bridging the digital divide in the state and the country.

"We're at a critical juncture with regard to the internet here in the United States," said postdoctoral fellow David Elliot Berman (Ph.D. '22), who helped

establish the institute with C. Edwin Baker Professor of Media Policy and Political Economy Victor Pickard. "Sixty-five billion dollars is going to be invested in the country's internet infrastructure through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and at least \$1.2 billion of it is going to Pennsylvania."

He said that despite technological advancements, Pennsylvania remains plagued by inconsistent and inadequate internet access. The problem is most severe in rural areas, where the lack of infrastructure makes it difficult for residents to connect to reliable, high-speed internet. However, even in areas with adequate infrastructure, affordability and digital literacy create obstacles for many households.



Through critical inquiry into digital equity issues, we dare to imagine what a truly democratic internet might look like.

— VICTOR PICKARD

The five founding members — Pickard at Annenberg, Berman at Seton Hall, and professors Sascha Meinrath, Christopher Ali (Ph.D. '13), and Sydney Forde at Penn State — recognize that addressing the digital divide requires more than top-down solutions.

"While every member of the PBR Institute has their own particular area of expertise, we all share the common conviction that we need to greatly expand the conversation when it comes to broadband policy in Pennsylvania and beyond," Pickard said.

The institute actively engages with communities across Pennsylvania to understand their unique challenges and needs.

This includes working with local organizations and residents to develop tailored solutions that work for specific communities and bringing attention to inequities in internet access.

While the institute has made significant strides, the road to universal internet access in Pennsylvania is still long. As their research and advocacy efforts continue, the institute aims to see a future where every Pennsylvanian, regardless of location or income, has the tools they need to succeed in a connected world.

"Through critical inquiry into digital equity issues, we dare to imagine what a truly democratic internet might look like," said Pickard. ■





Abortion, Not Inflation, Directly Affected Congressional Voting in 2022

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that Americans are “pocketbook voters,” views on abortion and the Supreme Court shifted votes in the 2022 elections.

A recent study by Annenberg Professor Diana Mutz and Penn Political Science Professor Edward Mansfield showed that views on abortion were central to shifting votes in the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. Despite severe inflation and grave concerns about deteriorating economic conditions, economic perceptions did not change votes.

The study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* in May 2023, demonstrates why the role of the economy is easily misinterpreted in research on American elections.

“Journalists frequently assert that Americans are ‘pocketbook voters,’ relying on their economic self-interest in making voting decisions,” said Mutz, Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication and director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics. “What we found, however, is that people’s views on abortion combined with the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* directly affected changes in vote choice between 2020 and 2022.” In the 2022 case, the Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating the constitutional right to abortion.

To evaluate how inflation and economic conditions more generally affected the 2022 midterms, the authors analyzed two waves of a probability panel survey that was fielded in 2020 and 2022 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

Though Americans were widely aware of mounting inflation when they went to the polls in 2022, respondents’ attributions of responsibility for inflation were either starkly partisan or completely nonpartisan. More than half of the representative national probability sample — approximately 55% — held either “neither party” or “both parties” responsible. This pattern blunted inflation’s potential impact as people either blamed the opposing party or did not assign responsibility to a single party.

Further, the study co-authors found that Americans who favored legal abortions were more likely to shift from voting for Republican candidates in 2020 to Democratic candidates in 2022, but the reverse was also true; those who opposed abortion became more likely to switch toward voting Republican. However, since a larger number of Americans supported abortion, the combination of these shifts ultimately improved the electoral prospects of Democratic candidates.

Likewise, those respondents whose confidence in the U.S. Supreme Court declined from 2020 to 2022 were more likely to shift from voting for Republican to Democratic congressional candidates.

“For example, the *Dobbs* decision influenced vote changes in both Republican and Democratic directions,” added Mutz. “As a result, it is often misleading for journalists to imply that a given political issue helped one candidate and hurt another. The economy is an issue that logically could hurt one side and help another since everyone favors a strong economy. But in actual practice, people’s perceptions of the economy typically mirror their pre-existing views, and thus, these perceptions don’t change their minds.”

The study also addresses why widespread predictions that the Democratic Party would suffer a substantial defeat in 2022 were wrong. In so doing, the study authors also question whether the long-standing emphasis on the economy in studies of U.S. voting is warranted.

Many studies assume that policy issues have little bearing on voting, while the economy has a substantial impact, especially in congressional elections. Yet from 2020 to 2022, congressional voting preferences changed in fundamentally rational ways based on abortion views, thus suggesting evidence of democratic accountability with respect to this particular issue.

“What people tell you is ‘most important’ in determining their vote is likely to be a reflection of their partisanship, rather than a source of change in their vote preferences,” concluded Mutz and Mansfield. ■



DIANA MUTZ

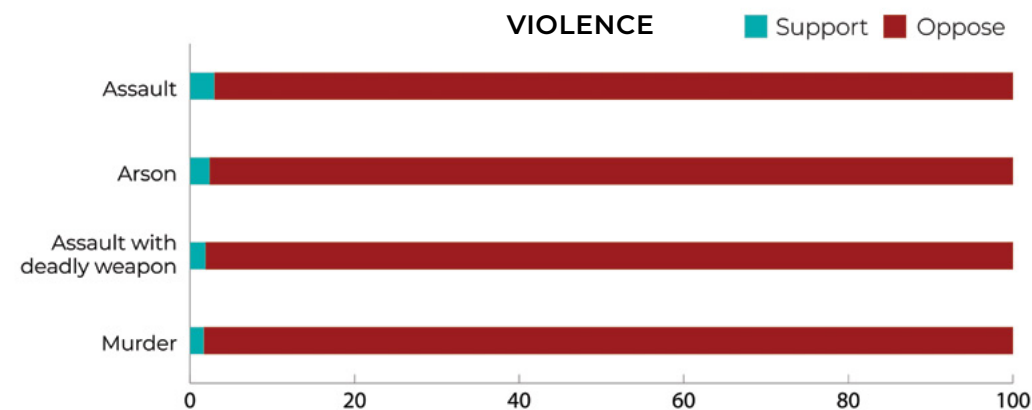
The Majority of Americans Do Not Support Anti-Democratic Behavior, Even When Elected Officials Do

96%
DO NOT SUPPORT
POLITICAL
VIOLENCE

within both parties

From September 2022 to October 2023, a period which included the 2022 midterm elections, the researchers surveyed more than 45,000 Democrats and Republicans on their attitudes toward five specific democratic norm violations:

- ▶ Reducing polling stations in areas where the other party is popular.
- ▶ Being more loyal to party than election rules and the Constitution.
- ▶ Censoring partisan media.
- ▶ Believing that the president should circumvent Congress.
- ▶ Believing that elected officials of one's own party should consider ignoring court decisions when the judges who issued these decisions were appointed by a president of the other party.



Despite rampant political polarization, the majority of Democrats and Republicans support democratic values and oppose political violence.

A new study from the Polarization Research Lab, a collaboration among researchers at the Annenberg School for Communication, Dartmouth College, and Stanford University, shows that despite a surge in anti-democratic behavior by U.S. politicians, the majority of Americans oppose anti-democratic attitudes and reject partisan violence.

They also gauged these Americans' feelings about four acts of political violence — assault, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder — as well as their perceptions about the other party.

After a year of weekly polling, researchers found that supermajorities of Americans oppose violations of democratic norms and political violence of all kinds.

“Public opposition to anti-democratic actions and political violence was not only overwhelming but also remarkably stable throughout the year,” said paper co-author Yphtach Lelkes, Polarization Research Lab co-director and associate professor of communication at Annenberg.

Of the five norm violations included in the surveys, 17.2% of Democrats and 21.6% of Republicans supported one norm violation. Only 6% of Democrats and 9% of Republicans supported two violations or more, suggesting that broad anti-democratic attitudes are very rare.

“Although any support for anti-democratic behavior is a cause for concern, the data show there is not a large anti-democratic constituency in America. Those who are the most likely to support anti-democratic actions are also less likely to be electorally important,” said Lelkes.

Throughout the year, support for political violence within both parties was always below 4%.

The researchers also found that both Democrats and Republicans overestimate the opposing party's support for norm violations, in some cases by four to five times.

When survey results showed that the majority of Americans oppose anti-democratic actions and political violence, the researchers wondered whether the politicians who do endorse democratic norm violations and political violence — such as the denial of election results and the January 6th insurrection — might merely be reflecting the sentiments of their specific constituents.

To test this, they gathered data on the U.S. House Representatives who either voted to overturn the 2020 election results or publicly denied the legitimacy of the 2020 election results.

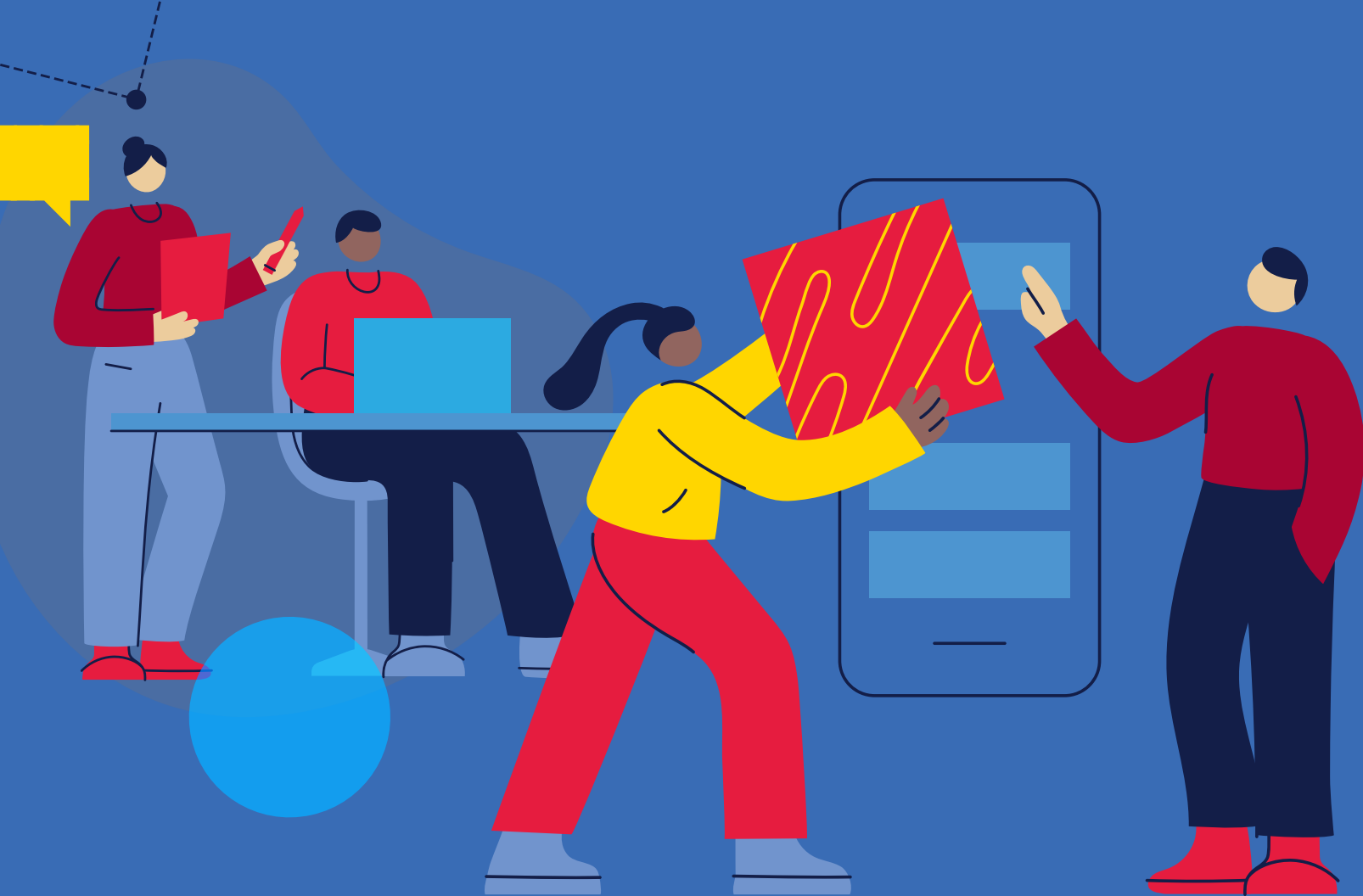
They then examined whether survey respondents represented by a member of Congress who denies election results were more inclined to prioritize party loyalty over adherence to election rules and the Constitution. However, they discovered that in these instances, there was no significant correlation between constituents' opinions and policymakers' actions.

“The real gap in support for democracy is not between Democratic and Republican voters, but between Republican voters and Republican representatives,” said lead author Derek Holliday, Polarization Research Lab postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University.

“While it is encouraging to see Republican voters, like Democrats, broadly support democratic norms, it is alarming that election-denying Republicans continue to win elections despite their democratic backsliding behavior,” said Holliday. ■



YPHTACH LELKES



Collaboration Unlocks Advances in COMMUNICATION

When researchers at the Annenberg School for Communication designed a pediatric COVID-19 vaccination campaign using augmented reality posters, they got feedback from some expert partners — community health ambassadors — before the launch.

Good thing, too. “They made many changes,” says Andy S.L. Tan, director of Annenberg’s Health Communication & Equity Lab and a co-investigator on the Philly CEAL (Community Engagement Alliance) project that included working with colleagues in the Schools of Nursing and Medicine and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. The community members emphasized that if the campaign just wagged a finger at them, no one would pay attention. “We reshaped the narrative. The co-design really paid off in terms of receptivity to this message among Philadelphia parents.”

The community partners also proved critical advocates. “There’s a trust factor,” Teresa Dooley, one of the Penn-trained health ambassadors, says, adding that communities of color like her West Oak Lane neighborhood were suspicious of the quick-to-market COVID-19 vaccine. “If somebody is coming from Penn, of course they’re giving information that’s in favor of it. It’s different when a neighbor is talking about it.”

Philly CEAL is just one of the many dozens of alliances that drive the study and practice of the multi-faceted Communication field at Penn Annenberg. Scholarship and research are at the center of Annenberg’s work. Faculty, students, and researchers use multiple methods, mediums, and platforms to engage with global events and theoretical questions. Whether they are shaping the norms around vaccines, studying people’s political views and preferences, or quantifying the extent of gender bias online, the Annenberg community is leading the understanding of important questions and pressing issues in our society with other Penn schools; with universities around the country and world, and with industry.



“Communication has always been interdisciplinary and collaborative,” Annenberg Dean Sarah Banet-Weiser says. “It’s not just about co-authoring. It’s about actually engaging with people who have different forms of expertise and adding your expertise so that you have a richer and more capacious understanding of the social or communication issue that’s being studied.”

Before her deanship, Banet-Weiser, herself, held the first-ever joint appointment at Annenberg, while on the faculty of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and continues to direct the first-of-its-kind Annenberg Center for Collaborative Communication, which unites the research of the two schools to revolutionize the role of communication in addressing complex issues.

“It is about refusing provinciality,” she says. “The University at large recognizes that research is best when collaborative.”

To that end, Annenberg’s Center for Media at Risk has joined with the Universidade Católica Portuguesa to hold the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication. Started in 2020, the school brings together doctoral students and early-career researchers from around the world to present on themes such as this year’s [2024] “Media and Ambivalence.” The Center also has a collaboration with the International Communication Association, through which a media practitioner attends and presents at the yearly conference. Annenberg’s Media, Inequality & Change Center (MIC), begun in 2018, works with Rutgers University and community activists to support policy interventions, address structural inequalities, and produce research. In one project, MIC, along with Pennsylvania State University’s College of Communications, are using research, advocacy, and community input to expand broadband access to underserved communities in the state, and ultimately, the nation.



One of Annenberg’s newest joint efforts is the Center for Media, Technology, and Democracy. Launched with the help of Knight Foundation, the Center includes collaboration with the School of Engineering and Applied Science, where it’s housed; the Wharton School; the School of Arts & Sciences; the School of Social Policy & Practice; Penn Carey Law, and the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC). One aim is to create a series of public-facing “dashboards” that combine artificial intelligence (AI) annotations from generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) with high-quality data sets on media consumption and media bias from industry partners such as Nielsen and PeakMetrics, says Duncan Watts, co-principal investigator and founding director of Penn’s Computational Social Science Lab. The hope, he says, is that AI analysis of large data sets, along with behavioral experiments, will uncover the causes and consequences of misinformation.



“There are very good people across all of these schools who work on similar problems, but they don’t always talk to each other,” he says. When interaction occurs, benefits accrue, he adds. “Annenberg Ph.D. students know different things from computer science Ph.D. students.

Together, they can work on projects that none of them would be able to do on their own.”

Perhaps no entity facilitates alliances more than APPC — which supports numerous collaborative efforts: a virtual driving assessment for teens with the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia; an election survey directed by political science professor Matthew Levendusky that led to the 2023 book *Democracy Amid Crises*, a work of the Annenberg Institutions of Democracy Collaborative of 11 scholars across seven universities; the work of climate scientist Michael E. Mann, inaugural director of the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media, and more. APPC also runs the Civics Renewal Network, the largest consortium of civics organizations, to help teachers educate good citizens through a searchable database of resources.

“The policy center is set up to create cross-campus collaboration on consequential issues that will advance the public good,” APPC Director Kathleen Hall Jamieson says. “Part of our goal is to increase the likelihood that scholars who work in communication are at the table when their voices will benefit the

work of others and when the knowledge others have will benefit the work of our scholars.”

Annenberg also is establishing an international footprint. In March[2024], Annenberg’s Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC) joined with the University of Hyderabad to pilot a week-long initiative that brought together in New Delhi doctoral communication students and scholars from Annenberg and around India for lectures and site visits, including to a community library and cricket match. The plan is to establish a bi-annual program housed at Penn’s Institute for the Advanced Study of India in Delhi, says Aswin Punathambekar, CARGC’s director.

“This is a modest effort to internationalize the field” he says. “In this moment, when there’s so much political suspicion of global connections, migration, refugee communities, I think it’s important to create a program that supports this kind of dialogue and exchange.”

Sim Gill, a third-year doctoral student from London, says she found the experience inspiring even though lectures did not directly pertain to her dissertation topic on the different ways violence against women and girls is communicated.



But then again, that’s how collaboration works.

“That’s the true gift of being in a room full of scholars,” Gill says. “You spark ideas, sit in quiet reflection, and navigate the boundless perspectives that redefine the way we understand the world. ■

“In these moments, new connections and ways of moving through spaces are formed, linking conversations and realizing the deeper potential that drives our collective transformation.”

– SIM GILL, PH.D. STUDENT

Annenberg’s Latest Collaborations

Each Annenberg Center has collaborations within and outside the university. Highlighted are a few:

<p>ANNENBERG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION (C3) between the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the Annenberg School at Penn</p>	<p>CENTER FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH IN GLOBAL COMMUNICATION (CARGC) collaborated with the University of Hyderabad and the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI) to launch its inaugural Global Media Cultures Collective International Doctoral Institute</p>	<p>CENTER FOR MEDIA AT RISK Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication in partnership with Universidade Católica Portuguesa</p>	<p>MEDIA, INEQUALITY & CHANGE CENTER (MIC) Pennsylvania Broadband Research (PBR) Institute, a collaboration with the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University</p>	<p>POLARIZATION RESEARCH LAB a collaboration among faculty at Dartmouth College, Stanford University, and the Annenberg School</p>	<p>ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER (APPC) the center has regular partnership with the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability and the Media, The Rendell Center for Civics and Civics Engagement and many others</p>	<p>CSS LAB works with many collaborators to gather and disseminate information, including Neilson, TVEyes, Wharton, and the City of Philadelphia</p>	<p>COMMUNICATION NEUROSCIENCE LAB regularly works with the Penn Netter Center for Community Partnerships to work within Philadelphia</p>

CULTURAL INQUIRY

A Symposium Explores Aging on Screen and on the Page

A symposium organized at Annenberg in September 2023 brought together scholars and media makers to think about how portrayals of aging on screen can have real-life consequences.

Titled “The Stories We Tell: Gender and Getting Older in the Media,” the two-day event was organized by the Annenberg Center for Collaborative Communication (C3) and directed by Sarah Banet-Weiser, the Walter H. Annenberg Dean of the Annenberg School.

During the opening keynote, University of Michigan’s Susan Douglas shared that even though people are living longer — there are more women over the age of 65 in the United States than ever before — the media, public policy, and health care are still deficient at handling aging, especially women aging.

She addressed that women are expected to be young forever, faced with advertisements for “anti-aging” beauty products, and that there are few characters in movies or television to whom they can relate.

“Being sidelined or marginalized in the media interlocks with being sidelined or marginalized in work, government policies, and everyday life,” she said.

Speakers at the symposium addressed how aging is seen as a source of dismay, discrimination, and even shame when societies see older people as “past their prime.”

Dean Banet-Weiser noted that age is typically left out of workplace diversity initiatives, and the decades-long attacks in the U.S. on Medicaid and Medicare also mean that cuts disproportionately hit women.



In many ways, the symposium was inspired by Wallis Annenberg, chairperson of the board, president and CEO of the Annenberg Foundation, and daughter of the founder of both Annenberg Schools, Walter Annenberg.

“Her investment in changing the story around aging was the initial motivation for organizing this symposium in the first place,” said Banet-Weiser.

One of those investments is the Wallis Annenberg GenSpace, an innovative community center in Los Angeles for older adults, a demographic that includes one in five Americans.

GenSpace Director Jennifer Wong spoke at the symposium, explaining the lack of resources for Americans who are living nearly a decade longer than they were in the mid-20th century. GenSpace offers something that is curiously rare in America: an anti-ageist, inclusive community for people who are too often isolated and left out.

“We need to push back against this understanding of age as a diagnosis,” Banet-Weiser said. “The conversation should be about community and care. We need to think deeply about what it means to be interdependent in this world, caring for multiple generations and forming a community around these issues.” ■

“Being sidelined or marginalized in the media interlocks with being sidelined or marginalized in work, government policies, and everyday life.”

— SUSAN DOUGLAS, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The Lisbon Winter School Delves into Media Complexity

For the past five years, Barbie Zelizer, director of Annenberg's Center for Media at Risk, has collaborated with the Universidade Católica Portuguesa to hold the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication.

"The Lisbon Winter School is designed to give junior and senior scholars a chance to wrestle together with an idea that is porous, contestable and in evolution," said Zelizer. "UVP's Nelson Ribeiro and I try to keep the Winter School small enough to foster ongoing conversation across participants but broad enough to accommodate multiple disciplinary perspectives on an idea."

This week-long workshop allows doctoral students and early-career researchers from around the world to explore pressing topics in media and communication with senior scholars. Previous themes have included "Media and Populism," "Media and Uncertainty," and "Media and Propaganda."

In January 2024, attendees gathered in Portugal's capital for the fourth edition of the school, dedicated to exploring a comparative and global approach to studying media and ambivalence. Scholars discussed a range of topics from political ambivalence on social media to journalists' ambivalence toward their increasingly precarious profession.

Dean Sarah Banet-Weiser was one of the school's convenors, and Professor Guobin Yang delivered a keynote address: "(Ambivalently) Feeling for the World: A Simmelian Approach to Mediated Pandemic Suffering."

Six Annenberg doctoral students gave presentations: Liz Hallgren, Louisa Lincoln, Thandi Lyew, Valentina Proust, Sara Reinis, and Ran Wang.

Wang said she attended the Winter School because the theme resonated with her research interests. "I gained so much from the Winter School," she said. "Ambivalence as a method is now a core theoretical framework for my research, and all the amazing keynotes opened up new analytical lenses for me."

Hallgren appreciated the school's welcoming environment. "As a junior scholar, I'm often intimidated by large conference settings where it can be hard to make your voice heard," she said. "At Lisbon Winter School, scholars at every stage in their careers are all there for the same reason: to have meaningful conversations about the most pressing media and communication issues of our time. This common ground allowed me to build my confidence in connecting with other scholars."



Proust agreed. "What appealed to me about the Lisbon Winter School is that, unlike ICA or other big conferences, it provides a smaller, more focused setting to share our work and receive feedback from peers and senior scholars," she said. "Big conferences can feel intense and overwhelming at times. The

Winter School lets graduate students build confidence in those kinds of environments while also fostering meaningful interactions with other attendees."

The 5th annual Lisbon Winter School is scheduled for January 2025 and will explore the study of media and fear, diving into climate anxiety, reporting on war and crisis, artificial intelligence concerns, and more. ■

Julia Ticona Awarded National Endowment for the Humanities Grant to Study Generative AI

The threat of automation has loomed over the creative and cultural industries since the launch of generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT and DALL-E, even inspiring a months-long strike by Hollywood writers and actors.

To understand how this rapidly evolving technology affects these industries, Annenberg Assistant Professor Julia Ticona and collaborator Caitlin Petre, associate professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University, have received a \$149,970 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Titled "Imagining AI in organized labor: Struggles over the value of cultural work," their research project is funded through the NEH's Dangers and Opportunities of Technology: Perspectives from the Humanities program.

Over two years, Ticona and Petre will speak to workers in cultural fields about how generative AI tools influence their understanding of their work and its social status.

"During the WAG [Writer's Guild of America] and SAG-AFTRA [Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] strikes, Caitlin and I were fascinated by the ways that creative and cultural workers were pushing guardrails for the use of AI to the top of their list of demands," Ticona said. "Given the long history of labor unions pushing back against tech in many different fields, especially in manufacturing, we wondered how these very different types of workers were both imagining and pushing back against AI."

Their grant will allow them to examine how evolving technology affects these industries and workers.

Through the project, Ticona and Petre aim to understand generative AI's evolving impact on creativity, working conditions in cultural industries, and meaning-making processes around emerging workplace technologies. ■



From Philly to Delhi

In March 2024, the Annenberg School's Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC) held its first Global Media Cultures Collective Doctoral Institute in Delhi, India. Co-sponsored by the University of Hyderabad, it brought together students from Indian doctoral programs and doctoral students from the Annenberg School.

Upon hearing of the Global Media Cultures International Doctoral Institute, Sim Gill's curiosity was immediately piqued. As a second-year Ph.D. student at Annenberg and a fellow at CARGC, the prospect of engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue with scholars from various geographical and cultural backgrounds excited her immensely. "It offered a unique opportunity for intellectual enrichment and collaboration with individuals I would otherwise not have the chance to meet, such as Ph.D. students from universities in India," she said.

During their time in New Delhi, the group delved into a variety of topics, ranging from the global reach of television to the impact of media on migration narratives.

The conversations explored the emotional and representational dimensions of media production, emphasizing the importance of recognizing real injustices and indignities that require our attention and care.

The second segment of the Institute comprised professional workshops designed to equip doctoral students with essential skills for success in academia and beyond. Covering topics like academic publishing and public speaking, these sessions provided invaluable resources for navigating both scholarly and alternative career paths.

The trip concluded with enlightening site visits led by CARGC fellow Rabani Garg. The group toured spots like the Community Library Project, part of

India's free library network advocating for an anti-caste, publicly owned, accessible library system for all, challenging the normalization of the lack of free libraries in India.

They also visited the Simurgh Centre, which facilitates artistic exchanges and collaborations among Afghan, Indian, and German practitioners living in New Delhi and interacted with zines and films that had been recently produced, centered mainly on themes of displacement, home, and connection. These experiences deepened their appreciation for the diverse activist efforts shaping the region's politics.

"Undoubtedly, one of the most significant aspects I've gained from the trip is the opportunity to delve into other people's research and immerse myself in a

different environment, providing the time and space to engage deeply with ideas," Gill said, "While we may interact regularly, uncovering the deeper layers of conversation is often challenging.

Gill said, "These transnational connections are pivotal in advancing comparative research on media technologies and cultures, bridging the gap between different regions and enriching both Global South and Western scholarship."



WATCH THE VIDEO:

COMPUTATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

When Young People Make Threats on Social Media, Do They Mean It?

In New York City, law enforcement regularly monitors the social media use of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) youth, compiling binders of Twitter and Facebook posts to link them to crimes or gangs, according to reports from *The New York Times*.

Something as benign as liking a photo on Facebook can be used as evidence of wrongdoing in a trial, so when police officers misinterpret social media posts — which often include slang, inside jokes, song lyrics, and references to pop culture — it can lead to serious consequences.

SAFELab, a transdisciplinary research initiative at the Annenberg School for Communication and Penn's School of Social

Practice and Policy, is led by Desmond Upton Patton, the Brian and Randi Schwartz University Professor. The initiative has developed a new web-based app that teaches adults to look more closely at social media posts: *InterpretMe*.

The app provides social media training for educators, law enforcement, and the press.

"These are the people who come into contact with young people regularly and have influence over their lives," said Siva Mathiyazhagan, research assistant professor and associate director of strategies and impact at SAFELab. "Yet many of them don't have the cultural context to understand how young people talk to one another online."



InterpretMe is built on the insights the SAFELab team gained after working with youth at the Brownsville Community Justice Center, a community center designed to reduce crime and incarceration in central Brooklyn, to help interpret and annotate social media posts made by people their age.

"The young people at the Brownsville Community Justice Center understood how emojis, slang, and hyper-local words are used online," Mathiyazhagan said. "Their insights were key to building the platform."

During *InterpretMe* training, users are placed in a fictional scenario in which they encounter a potentially harmful social media post, such as a student seeming to be depressed or potentially violent, and must decide how to react.

While walking through the scenario, users gather context about the post by doing things like looking at the young person's previous posts or asking friends about their social life. At the end of a module, a user must decide how they will proceed — what they'll say to their editor or principal about the student — and are invited to reflect on its reasoning.

SAFELab tested the training with 60 teachers, 50 journalists, and 30 law enforcement officials in phase one.

Participants took surveys before and after the training to judge how bias might affect their social media interpretation skills. Mathiyazhagan said that bias scores decreased across all groups after using the training.

Next, SAFELab plans to incorporate machine learning into *InterpretMe*. The team has long been experimenting with AI. With the help of both computer scientists and formerly gang-involved youth in Chicago, they created a machine-learning model trained to detect gang signs, slang, local references, and emotion in the hopes of preventing violence.

While the model is based on data from Chicago, it could be expanded to include context for any area.

A single person might miss song lyrics in a Facebook post, but a machine trained on community insights could flag them and stop a misunderstanding from happening. ■

"Through artificial intelligence, we might be able to not only speed up the interpretation process but also fill in cultural gaps," said Mathiyazhagan.

Annenberg Experts Unravel Social Media's Role in Democracy

After the surprising and turbulent 2016 United States presidential election, many observers accused Facebook of undermining the democratic process by serving up misinformation to its users. There wasn't necessarily solid evidence that misinformation changed voting behavior, but many believed this was correct.

To understand the impact of social media on the 2020 election, Facebook's parent company, Meta, allowed a team of 17 academic researchers from across the country to analyze a wealth of data never before seen by those outside the company.

Of these 17 researchers, five are Annenberg School faculty or alumni: Professor Deen Freelon, Professor Sandra González-Bailón, Natalie Jomini Stroud (Ph.D. '06), Emily Thorson (Ph.D. '13), and Magdalena Wojcieszak (Ph.D. '09).

Professor González-Bailón says that the fact that many of her collaborators have connections to Annenberg is no surprise.

"Annenberg has been a hub in political communication research for decades now," she said, "so it naturally served as an incubator for many of the collaborative ties that are activated for projects like this."

Thorson, the first Annenberg student to earn a joint doctoral degree in communication and political science and now an assistant professor of political science at Syracuse University, agrees.

"Annenberg is truly committed to interdisciplinary work," Thorson said. "The ability to translate between political science, communications, and policy, for example, is really helpful for a large-scale project like this."

In July 2023, the group published their first round of findings — four papers in *Nature* and *Science* examining how the design and algorithms of Facebook and Instagram content affected American voters in the 2020 election. They found:

- 1 Algorithms are extremely influential in terms of what people see and in shaping their on-platform experiences.
- 2 There is significant ideological segregation in political news exposure.
- 3 Algorithm adjustments significantly change what people see and their level of engagement on the platforms, but three-month experimental adjustments did not notably affect political attitudes.

In May 2024, a fifth paper by the team, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, showed that when over 35,000 Facebook and Instagram users deactivated their accounts for six weeks before the 2020 U.S. election, it had little or no effect on their political views, negative opinions of opposing parties, or beliefs around election fraud claims.

"Each paper has a core team that worked on it, but all authors who worked on any paper are represented on all papers," said Freelon, the lead author of an upcoming paper on hateful content on the platforms. "We all collectively created the general blueprint that all papers have and will follow."

An additional dozen or so papers from the project will reach publication — and no doubt make headlines — in the coming years. ■



AI-Powered Bias Detector Transforms News Analysis

The first 2024 U.S. presidential debate happened on June 27, with then-candidate President Joe Biden and President-elect Donald Trump sharing the stage for the first time in four years. Penn computational social scientist Duncan Watts considered that an ideal moment to test a tool his lab had been developing: the **Media Bias Detector**.

“The debates offer a real-time, high-stakes environment to observe and analyze how media outlets present and potentially skew the same event,” said Watts, a Penn Integrates Knowledge Professor with appointments in the Annenberg School, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, and the Wharton School. “We wanted to equip regular people with a powerful, useful resource to better understand how major events, like this election, are being reported on.”

The Media Bias Detector uses artificial intelligence to analyze articles from major news publishers, categorizing them by topic, detecting events, and examining factors like tone, partisan lean, and fact selection.

WHAT SPARKED THE DEBATE AROUND MEDIA NARRATIVES

Watts says the idea of the Detector had been brewing for years, long before he joined Penn in 2019, when he’d read articles on topics he happened to have expertise in and started to realize that “some of this is just complete hogwash,” he said.

“But that really got me thinking: What about the stuff that I don’t know about? Is that all just fine, and the only problematic information out there is just the stuff I happen to know about?”

But, as with many people, Watts said, “those concerns grew following the coverage of the 2016 election. It made me think that media bias might actually be a big

problem, not just a nuisance in my little corner of the information landscape.”

Watts started investigating how some of the ways information related to the election and other global events circa 2016 were covered and began to see that media narratives about “misinformation,” “fake news,” and “echo chambers” were in and of themselves misleading and in some instances “overblown.”

However, according to research led by Watts, just 4% of Americans actually fell into echo chambers online. But the number for television was much higher, with 17% of people in the U.S. consuming TV news from only partisan left- or right-leaning sources, news diets they tend to maintain month over month.

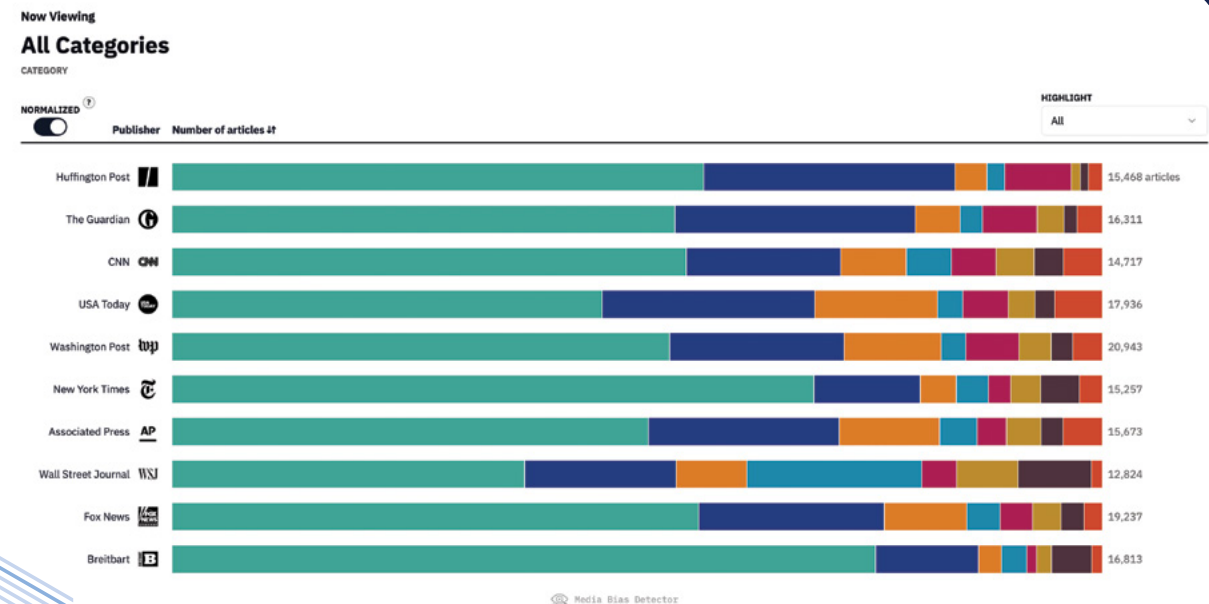
These experiences led Watts to believe there was a problem with how the media presents information, but it seemed out of reach to build something that could consolidate news articles in real-time with a high degree of granularity and let people know where the biases were.

“The methods that could do this sort of classification at scale didn’t work sufficiently well until the latest generation of large language models (LLMs) arrived towards the end of 2022,” Watts said. “The popularization of OpenAI’s ChatGPT truly changed the game and made it possible for our team to design the Detector around OpenAI’s GPT infrastructure.”

A BIT OF THE NUTS AND BOLTS

Playing crucial roles in leveraging these LLMs to build the Detector were Samar Haider, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the School of Engineering and Applied Science; Amir Tohidi, a postdoctoral researcher in the CSSLab; and Yuxuan Zhang, the lab’s data scientist.

Haider, who focuses on the intersection of natural language processing and computational social science, explains that the team “gives GPT the article and asks



“We’re currently scraping 10 major news websites every few hours and pulling the top 10 articles, which is a few hundred articles per publisher per day, and processing all of that data.” — Yuxuan Zhang

it to say which of a list of topics it belongs to and, for events, to compare the meaning or semantic similarity of the text.”

To manage this massive influx of data, the team developed its own pipeline.

Tohidi says along with AI, human judgment remains a critical component of their system. Every week, research assistants read a subset of articles to verify GPT’s labels, ensuring they maintain high accuracy and can adjust for any errors they may encounter along the way.

“We’re currently scraping 10 major news websites every few hours and pulling the top 10 articles, which is a few hundred articles per publisher per day, and processing all of that data. We’re planning to increase it to the top 30 articles for our future versions to better represent media coverage. It’s a massive task,” Zhang said, “but it’s essential for keeping the tool up to date and reliable.”

A CHANGING VIEW OF THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Haider notes that in building the tool he has come to appreciate the power of biases in language, such as when the same set of facts can convey different messages depending on how writers use them.

“It’s just incredibly fascinating to see how these subtle differences in the way you report an event, like how



DUNCAN WATTS

you put sentences together or the words you use, can lead to changes for the reader that journalists might not realize because of their own biases,” Haider said. “It’s not just about detecting bias but understanding how these subtle cues can influence the reader’s perception.”

Watts notes that in watching how this component can take in the facts and generate articles, some with a positive spin and others negative, “it is a little spooky to see how much you can alter things without lying. But it’s also potentially a really cool feature that can write differently biased synthetic articles about events on the fly.”

Watts says that there is no shortage of people who love to criticize journalists and that he isn’t trying to add fuel to the fire or create an AI tool to replace reporters. Rather, he and the CSSLab have created the Media Bias Detector in recognition of the importance of journalism.

“Journalists are crucial, as the fourth estate,” Watts said. “We want this tool to hold up a data-driven mirror to current journalistic practices, both good and bad, and to help the public and journalists themselves better understand the biases present in media coverage.” ■

TRY THE MEDIA BIAS DETECTOR:



CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

Teaching Climate Change Communication, From the Classroom to a Conference of Journalists

Michael Mann and Kathleen Hall Jamieson co-taught the course "Climate Change and Communication" to undergraduate and graduate students in the spring.

When climate scientist Michael Mann was in talks to join the University of Pennsylvania faculty, he met with Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC), to ask if she would be interested in working with him if he came to Penn. Jamieson enthusiastically said she would.

In Spring 2024, they taught a course, "Climate Change and Communication", tied to the 2024 Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) conference, which brought hundreds of journalists who study and produce environmental communication to campus. This gave students the opportunity to interview journalists from outlets such as *Inside Climate News*, *The Guardian*, *Vox*, *Mother Jones*, and *Mongabay*.

On the first night of the conference, Jamieson, Mann, now the director of the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media (PCSSM), and Rick Weiss, director of *SciLine*, sat onstage at Penn's Zellerbach Theatre, discussing student work from the course.

Undergraduate and graduate students identified six misconceptions and six conspiracy theories, respectively, about climate change and worked to pinpoint scientific sources that would undermine the premises of these problematic notions.

Audience members laughed as Jamieson directed to a QR code on the screen behind her to access climate communication resources from APPC and PCSSM, as "scan the QR code" had already become the refrain of the paperless conference.



Research and engagement that matter.





COMBATING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

“The problem isn’t so much a deficit of information, it’s a surplus of misinformation,” said Mann at a lunchtime session on the first day of the SEJ conference. With climate change denial on the wane, “because we can all see it’s happening,” Mann said bad actors are using other tactics: doomism, division, deflection, and delaying action.

The topic of this session — “The Intersection Between Disinformation Research and Climate Science” — was also addressed in the “Climate Change and Communication” course. The class’s 24 undergraduates split into groups to research climate misconceptions. At the same time, the seven graduate students focused on conspiracy theories, all for collaborative white papers on “Leading Fallacies and Misframings in Climate Discourse.” The week before the conference, one representative for each topic presented for five minutes before Jamieson and Mann gave one minute of feedback in class followed by written comments.

The undergrads focused on six myths: individuals cannot make a meaningful difference; it’s too late to act; climate science knowledge is unreliable; solar and wind power are unacceptably costly and unreliable; climate change solutions cause problems for other parts of the ecosystem; and climate change is beneficial. The “it’s too late to act” fallacy is known as doomism, a notion that Mann has worked to counteract by promoting “urgency and agency.”

Third-year student Elizabeth Collins presented her group’s paper refuting that climate change solutions such as wind farms, solar panels, and

electric vehicles cause problems for other parts of the ecosystem. She noted that the National Ocean Industries Association and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have found no credible link between offshore wind activities and whale mortalities, and she concluded with the benefits of offshore wind.

Collins, a communication major from Phoenix, Arizona, said she was motivated to take this course after taking “Introduction to Political Communication” with Jamieson in the fall and felt inspired by her vast knowledge.

The course had several guest speakers, like climate journalist Wolfgang Blau, Brown University climate scientist Kim Cobb, Associated Press science writer Seth Borenstein, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* national opinion columnist Will Bunch. Collins says the guest lectures showed her that it’s important to take climate change awareness and solutions into everyday careers, not only in scientific fields, because that’s how change will happen.

Students were tasked with developing concise questions for each guest grounded in assigned readings and based on the guest’s unique expertise. The class also included writing a letter to the editor, an op-ed, and practicing fact-checking.

“We’re asking a lot of them, but I feel like they’re rising to the occasion,” Mann said on the day of the white paper presentations.

“The good is that it’s a unique opportunity. The bad is that it’s a unique opportunity. We can’t teach the same course a year from now.”

—MICHAEL MANN

WHY CLIMATE LANGUAGE MATTERS

Annabelle Horton, a first-year doctoral student in earth and environmental science who is one of Mann’s Ph.D. students, said the class was challenging but well worth the work.

“It’s been one of the most impactful classes I’ve taken as a science student, and I feel like I will use so much of what I’ve learned in my career, in the sense that it will definitely tweak how I write things,” said Horton, who is from Philadelphia. Her work in the Mann Research Group involves researching changes in the frequency and intensity of winter storms.

Horton said her biggest takeaways from the class were that “language matters so much more than we think” and that “there is such a disparity between the language I’ve been using to describe science and the language that is accessible for the public.”

Horton said the class talked about using “pollutants” or “methane gases” instead of “greenhouse gases” because the latter may lead people to think of the positive connotation of plants growing. She also noted that calling someone a “climate change denier” could make them defensive, which doesn’t help persuade.

Similarly, second-year Master of Environmental Studies student Mike Muldoon noted that “the term ‘conspiracy’ itself is something we use as a tool in the classroom,” but it’s better to use different language when communicating about these beliefs externally. Muldoon, who is from Exton, Pennsylvania, said he has been struck by “the care with which both professors approach the topic of handling misinformation and the respect they pay to people who may have been misinformed.” He said the class also taught him about inoculation, explaining why misinformation is false to someone before it reaches them.

He says climate communication is a big part of his work as a speechwriter for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Muldoon attended the SEJ conference as a Climate Change and Communication class student, which included going to a training

from SciLine on talking to the media, and as an EPA employee. He also watched the keynote speech by EPA Administrator Michael Regan.

“I always find unexpected things happening when I’m team-teaching, and they’re inevitably good,” said Jamieson.

At the conference, graduate students walked around with a badge below their name tags that read, “Ask me about debunking climate conspiracy theories.” The group flagged down a Wyoming journalist to ask about misconceptions he deals with, whether he tries to refrain from language that might polarize readers, and what types of stories his audience likes best.

In class the week after the conference, undergraduate and graduate students shared what they learned from their journalist interviews: Balancing reality and urgency with local stories that inspire action is important. It’s important to meet people where they are.

There isn’t one single policy that would solve climate change, but there’s a compounding effect.

Students then incorporated information from journalists into their white paper contributions and filmed a video explainer of their insights, with help from the Annenberg Media Lab.

“They’re actually producing communication in the context of theory about communication,” Jamieson said. “Teach the course from a climate science perspective without a focus on communication theory, and the students’ white papers and videos might not be as persuasive as they could be.” ■

What Are the Most Effective Strategies To Inspire Action on Climate Change?

The Communication Neuroscience Lab conducted an intervention tournament, testing six strategies to change beliefs and intentions regarding climate change.

It's often challenging for individuals to feel like they can make an impact in the global climate debate — if they even know how. Contacting your representatives to tell them you care about climate issues? Swapping out beef for chicken or vegetables? Even when people understand what they should be doing, they often default to inaction because the crisis can seem so distant from everyday life or scary to think about.

To figure out how to effectively motivate people toward climate change action, researchers in the Communication Neuroscience Lab at the Annenberg School, the Climate Communication Division of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC), and the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability and the Media (PCSSM) tested numerous methods to educate people about climate change and spur them to take action. Ranging from quizzes to imagination exercises, the researchers hoped to determine which strategies are most effective and for whom.

"Climate change is primarily a problem of human behavior. As psychologists and communication scientists, we have the tools to discover how we can motivate people to feel like they can and should take action," said Allie Sinclair, study leader and the Joan Bossert Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Communication Neuroscience Lab and PCSSM.

The interdisciplinary team ran experiments with more than 7,500 people to test various strategies informed by how the brain works.

After every intervention, participants were asked to rate their intentions to do things like engage in individual and community-focused climate mitigating actions, share articles about the climate crisis, or sign petitions about

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climate policy, as well as emotional aspects, such as how distant the climate crisis feels to them — in terms of time, geographic space, and personal impact.

"By using the tournament format, we could test many different behavioral interventions at the same time and see which intervention worked best for each goal, and for which demographic groups," Sinclair said.

The team used strategies that tap into several well-defined psychological processes.

For example, several interventions tap into people's sense of what is relevant to them or people they care about. In some interventions, participants reflected on why climate-related news matters to themselves or to people they know; these interventions were the best for motivating people to share climate news and petitions.

The strategies focused on imagining the future were based on previous research led by Sinclair showing that when people fire up their imaginations to picture a COVID-19-related scenario - like a person contracting the virus at a party — it can change beliefs about the risk of catching COVID-19, and willingness to take risks in daily life. A similar intervention in the tournament effectively motivated people to take action to address climate change.

Finally, the strategies focused on impact included providing information about which actions are most beneficial for the environment or guiding people to brainstorm personal benefits of actions that are good for both you and the planet.

"In ongoing work, we're testing interventions that combine multiple strategies and exploring how we can bridge the partisan divide on climate change," Sinclair said. "We hope to translate our winning interventions into interactive online tools that anyone can use."



Members of the lab involved in the tournament included Annenberg Vice Dean Emily Falk, Post-Doctoral Fellow Allie Sinclair, Research Director Dani Cosme, Senior Research Coordinator José Carreras-Tartak, Annenberg doctoral student Kirsten Lydic, as well as Penn Psychology doctoral students Taurean Butler and Christian Benitez. The team also collaborated with Presidential Distinguished Professor Michael Mann and Administrative Coordinator Heather Kostick at PCSSM. ■



Selling the American People: Q&A with Lee McGuigan (Ph.D. '18)

Contemporary advertising is driven by data, as marketers track TikTok likes, app downloads, and email open rates to calculate how to sell everything from toilet paper to frozen pizza.

In his new book, *Selling the American People: Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech*, alum Lee McGuigan (Ph.D. '18) traces the history of digital advertising and shows how data-driven marketing emerged in the 1950s when ad agencies began using computers and mathematical models to “optimize” their work.

Adtech, short for advertising technology, is pervasive in all areas of our lives, McGuigan says, and is comprised of the systems that advertisers use to decide which ads to run and to whom, from click trackers to AI models that predict which image will encourage you to buy a product.

Advertisers have always relied on data to make these decisions, McGuigan says, but with the advent of computers, marketers’ ability to collect and process data became more and more precise, launching the age of “big data” before Google even existed.

We recently spoke to McGuigan, assistant professor at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, about the book, which is available now from MIT Press.

Where does the title “*Selling the American People*” come from, and how does it relate to the themes of your book?

McGuigan: I came across the phrase in an article reporting on

a speech by a TV executive in the 1950s. He was talking about the power of TV to persuade viewers to buy advertisers’ products. I found it useful because its syntax invites us to think of both selling things to audiences and selling audiences to advertisers. My book is about how those twin processes — accelerating the circulation of commodities and turning moments of attention into investment opportunities — are key forces behind the development of seemingly new forms of adtech.

How did advertisers use data to “optimize” ads before the internet?

McGuigan: Advertisers and the ad agencies working for them have used data for well over a century to inform strategic decisions and to tell authoritative stories about those decisions (and the decision-makers). In the mid-20th century, ad professionals took to using digital computers to, among other things, make seemingly smarter choices about how to spend advertising budgets on media placements so as to maximize financial returns for advertisers. Basically, using



automation and mathematical models, the industry tried to get better at predicting and measuring the value of advertising opportunities and efforts — and to do that all much faster than before.

How do you predict advertising and consumer surveillance will evolve with the rise of AI technology?

McGuigan: A lot of surveillance and discrimination processes will intensify. AI is already being promoted as a solution to adtech’s privacy problems. But it doesn’t fix those problems, and the fascination with AI is likely to enrich already dominant companies who own or control unmatched data assets, computing power, and infrastructural bottlenecks. And the same themes that were used to herald the power of automation and optimization in advertising in the mid-20th century are being reanimated to dramatize AI. It’s the latest act in a long-running play. ■



Meet Christopher Ali (Ph.D. '13)

Christopher Ali is the Pioneers Chair in Telecommunications and professor of telecommunications in the Bellisario College at Penn State. In this video, Ali discussed why tens of millions of rural Americans don’t have affordable, high-speed internet connectivity, and how his figure skating background prepared him for the classroom.

“One thing that figure skating taught me is if you fall in front of 20,000 people and you learn to get up, you can stand in front of 300 students and teach,” Ali said. ■



Getting to Know the Annenberg Advisory Board Co-Directors

The newly launched Dean’s Advisory Board provides counsel and advice to the Dean in setting and achieving the strategic goals of the school, serves as a sounding board for initiatives, and works to connect the school to its alumni and the broader stakeholders in the field of Communication. Its members are academicians and policy and industry experts in the field of Communication and areas relevant to Annenberg’s activities.



AMY JO SMITH (M.A.C. '88)

Amy Jo Smith is President and CEO of DEG: The Digital Entertainment Group, a leading trade group for the digital entertainment industry, and works with some of the world’s largest media and entertainment companies, consumer electronics manufacturers, platform providers, and technology companies. (A former White House communications advisor, Smith led the effort to promote home entertainment’s evolution with the highly successful launch of DVD technology.) DEG has two working communities to focus on the ever-expanding digital entertainment ecosystem: the Direct-to-Consumer Alliance (D2CA) that works to help build a robust global marketplace, and the Advanced Content Delivery Alliance (ACDA) that enables improved content delivery and a better consumer experience.

What remains your favorite memory from your time at Annenberg?

Smith: In one of my first classes at Annenberg we were discussing the upcoming Super Bowl with ads priced at \$1 million. Prior to that, I hadn’t thought much about the power of sports to engage huge numbers of eyeballs, nor, how much value that brings to a brand. I loved how relevant that was to everyday life, and it inspired me to pursue further study in media and communications.

How did your time here help with your career development?

Smith: Annenberg taught me how to think about the power of media and communications in everyday life and how to embrace that in the corporate world. I learned to think about things in a responsible and hopefully meaningful way.

What inspired you to connect back with Annenberg? And why is this tie with your alma mater important for you?

Smith: When then Dean Michael Delli Carpini reached out about my possible participation in the Annenberg Alumni Advisory Board, I was interested on first blush. But after attending my first meeting and hearing the Dean’s report of the school, I was wowed. It’s been wonderful to hear how the school is adapting to the changing landscape we live in to stay relevant and meaningful. I’m proud that I’ve been able to give back by providing insights and suggestions. And it’s been wonderful to connect with other alumni.



NIKHIL SINHA (Ph.D. '91)

Nikhil Sinha has spent a career shuttling between launching and building global start-ups and leading various academic efforts, including as Vice Chancellor of Shiv Nadar University in India and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Texas. Most recently, he served as Chief Content Officer at Coursera, one of the world’s leading higher education platforms.

What remains your favorite memory from your time at Annenberg?

Sinha: My favorite memory is of all the evenings I spent in the basement in conversation with my fellow graduate students. The depth and breadth of the discussions were amazing, and those engagements, along with the classes and the culture of the school, were a major factor in my development not only as an Annenberg graduate but also as a professional in the field of communication.

How did your time here help with your career development?

Sinha: My first job after completing my Ph.D. was as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Radio-TV-Film (RTF) at the University of Texas at Austin. The RTF Department, in 1991, consisted of a wide range of areas of focus – critical and cultural studies, media industries, international communication, etc. Even though my own area of focus was political economy and communication policy, as an Annenberg grad I could engage in academic conversations with my colleagues across the department, whether their work was qualitative or quantitative or critical or administrative. And I also served on doctoral committees of many students whose work was outside of my own areas of focus. The intellectual rigor of the Annenberg program also served me well once I left academia and began a career in the private sector.

What inspired you to connect back with Annenberg? And why is this tie with your alma mater important for you?

Sinha: I never disconnected from Annenberg! From the time I left in 1991 to today, I’ve always remained connected in some form. Whenever I was in Philadelphia, I met faculty and students and attended events at the school. I’ve spoken on many alumni panels and have served on the Alumni Advisory Board for nearly two decades. This continuous and ongoing connection has allowed me to stay informed of the developments in communication, stay connected with the faculty and the ever-evolving student body, and provided me an opportunity to contribute to the school by sharing my expertise and experience. ■

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